

Limen and Liminality in Propertius

The well-argued point made by Heslin (2010) that Propertius' *Monobiblos* was written in the pre-Actium era and published in 33 BCE has sparked a discussion and re-examination of the ways in which literary historians periodize the division between Triumviral- and Augustan literature. Should, the poetry of Propertius, along with that of Vergil, Tibullus, Horace, be reassessed as Triumviral and thus as the voice of the last generation of Republican Rome? In regard to Propertius, the answer lies, to a not insignificant extent, in the organizing idea of his *oeuvre*. In regard to Book 2, Breed (2010) identifies the discussion of civil war as a point of reference. For Schwindt (2013), in turn, the four-book collection is united by a "cineric prosopography," which is powerfully linked to "the most manifest memory trace of the Republic" in Propertius' *oeuvre*, namely, the ashes of the forefathers, mentioned in Elegy 1.22.3-4 (Schwindt 2013, 55).

This paper aims at advancing the existing scholarship on this topic, by discussing the findings by Breed and Schwindt in the context of Elegy 3.22, also known as Propertius' *laudes Romae*. It will argue that neither Elegy 1.22 nor Elegy 3.22 refer to the end of the Republic, but to the impending loss of it. Instead it is rather the liminal status between life and death, i.e., between Republic and Principate that is at the heart of *Elegy 3.22* and, more broadly, of the Propertian concept and discourse of elegiac love. The *limen* and the "erotic placements and displacements" around it (Pucci 1978, 54) thus receive an additional meaning and significance.

In support of this argument, this paper will argue that, informed by the representation of space in Early Imperial encomiastic rhetoric as well as in Cicero's oratory, *Elegy 3.22* offers a praise of contemporary Rome's political landscape that is highly ironic, as it joins patriotic

sentiment with an evocation of both the memory of the Roman Republic and the threat that Octavian-Augustus' actions, among others, those in the civil wars, have posed to it.

Furthermore, by deploying Ciceronian imagery for creating a *nexus* between his fear of the loss of his beloved and the notion of the impending end of the Republic, the Propertian speaker endows Elegy 3.22 with a meta-language, joined with the device of realism, that can be applied throughout the four-book collection, including to Elegy 1.22. The unburied bones of the Propertian speaker's kinsman (*tu nullo miseri contegis ossa solo*), mentioned in Elegy 1.22.8, correspond to the not appropriately buried bones of Cynthia in Elegy 4.7. Only when both sets are buried as it befits them, then the Republic will be buried.

Placed at the end of the third book and almost next to the Propertian speaker's farewell to Cynthia, Elegy 3.22 thus indirectly announces the approaching end of the Roman Republic and, by extension, of the topic of elegiac love. Cynthia's reappearance in *Elegy* 4.8, in turn, and her mopping of the threshold (*et pura limina tergit aqua*, 84) of her lover's house(!) may be synonymous with the business (not) as usual of the *res publica restituta*.